

TAAS: The Case for Negligent Marketing

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and academic outcomes and students who repeated a grade were significantly more likely to drop out of high school.

Serious problems were also discovered with the use of similar tests as graduation exit exams to deny students a high school diploma. In this regard, the panel of experts concluded that:

- There is little evidence to suggest that graduation exit exams in current use have been validated properly against the defined curriculum and actual instruction.

- Failing a minimum competency graduation test significantly increases the likelihood that a student will leave school, especially for minority and/or bilingual students with good grades. The perceived stigma attached to test failure may cause students with higher grades to experience a substantial drop in self-esteem or a sense of embarrassment before their peers.

- Hispanics, African-Americans, and poor children are more likely to attend schools that do not provide the high-quality curriculum and instruction needed to pass these tests.

- Failure to complete high school, whether due to graduation tests or other reasons,

is increasingly associated with problems in employment, earnings, family formation and stability, civic participation, and health.

NEGLIGENCE OR INDIFFERENCE?

Whether through negligence or indifference, Texas legislators and the general public have been misled by the creators of the TAAS into thinking that substantial improvements in student achievement would follow from a strong accountability system fashioned around the TAAS. In reality, little evidence has been provided by advocates of the social promotions bill that student achievement has improved or that lifetime opportunities are better for students passing the TAAS.

On the other hand, there are sufficient reasons to believe that the economic futures of Hispanic and African-American school children will be seriously threatened by expansion of a testing policy with unproven benefits.

Nearly half of all African-American (49%) and more than half of all Hispanic students (54%) in Texas schools are lost between the 9th and 12th grades, as noted by a recent study of Texas public school enrollments by Intercultural Development Research Associates (1999).

These dropout rates are substantially higher than the lower rates reported by the Texas Education Agency, which excludes thousands of students that left school because they opted for a GED, students who failed the TAAS but completed their high school requirements, and students who supposedly returned to their home country. Are lawmakers and minority parents prepared to substantially raise these dropout rates with a politically popular testing policy of questionable value?

Currently, the majority of students that are retained or held back in grade in Texas public schools are Hispanic and African-American. In their most current analysis (1998) of retention rates in Texas public schools, the Texas Education Agency found that, over the four-year period from 1993 to 1997, nearly 70% of all the students retained in grade were Hispanic or African-American, while Hispanic students consistently represented the largest percentage of students retained each year. Higher retention rates and lower percentages of students passing the TAAS were noted in districts and campuses with higher percentages of minority students. No evidence was provided to confirm whether these students had actually benefited from the grade retention decision.

HISPANICS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS ARE MORE LIKELY TO FAIL TAAS

Despite test score improvements, Hispanics and African Americans are far more likely than Whites to fail the TAAS. For the Spring 1998 assessment, 38% of African-American and 33% of Hispanic sophomores failed all of the TAAS tests, compared to a 13% failure rate for Whites. Although Hispanics and African-Americans comprised about 40% of Texas high school seniors, they comprised 85% of those who failed the TAAS.

While TAAS advocates may choose to boast about test score improvements, one should also keep in mind that higher test scores can result from the exclusion of thousands of students who traditionally score lower on the TAAS, such as students who dropped out of school or decided to obtain a GED. In other words, are the year-to-year improvement in TAAS passing rates really a reflection of better teaching, or just the systematic exclusion of low-test scorers? The public deserves to know the answer to this question.

The TAAS continues to show a very weak correlation to grades in school, especially in predominately minority school districts. In their most recent correlational study of a large urban school district, the Texas Education Agency found that 39% of the students who earned an "A" in their mathematics

course failed the TAAS mathematics, while another 56% of the students earning a "B" grade also failed. This strongly suggests that the curriculum provided to students in urban schools is "not aligned" with the curriculum defined by the TAAS, or is simply not being taught.

Surprisingly, Texas legislators seemed unconcerned about whether remedial instruction will work for the thousands of school children who will continue to fail the TAAS.

Minority parents are not likely to take full advantage of the opportunity to appeal a decision to retain a child. Hispanic parents, in particular, will not fully understand the stakes involved in the appeals conference due to a lack of English-language proficiency, unfamiliarity with the language of testing, and the likelihood that school staff are not going to fully disclose the numerous problems associated with grade retention and minimum competency tests. Consequently, minority parents may unknowingly agree to retain their child with the expectation that grade retention is a better educational option than promotion.

TAAS RACIAL GAP UNLIKELY TO DIMINISH IN THE FUTURE

The standards for passing minimum competency tests like the TAAS are likely to increase into the future as higher proportions of students show mastery of the TAAS. There is little evidence that a particular passing score is related to success after leaving high school, the passing standards will continue increasing into the future in response to the subjective will of key politicians who believe that the TAAS is becoming too easy and less challenging. Hence, the current racial gap in TAAS passing rates will not likely diminish in the future as long as the minimum standards continue to "float" along with political rather than professional testing procedures.

Legislators seem to have forgotten that students have a constitutionally protected property interest in receiving a high school diploma. As such, only the strictest test validation standards should be applied when denying students the opportunity to continue in school or receive a diploma.

WAKE UP CALL FOR PARENTS

The findings from the panel of experts at the National Academy of Sciences should be considered a wake-up call for Hispanic and African-American parents to contact their legislative representatives and demand to know the reasons that their children's educational futures are being placed at greater risk. More importantly, these calls should be made before the Texas House of Representatives meet in the near future to vote on the bill.